

## Each Day We Wait, Saddam Grows More Powerful

By KHIDHIR HAMZA

With the war against Afghanistan more or less won, the focus is once again on Iraq. During the eight years of the Clinton administration's weak hand in dealing with Saddam Hussein we were led to believe that a catastrophe awaits those who try to unseat him. The real catastrophe, however, would be allowing him to remain in power.

What are the facts about Saddam's military situation—including his weapons of mass destruction that President George W. Bush is so concerned about? Things have definitely changed as a result of the Gulf War and 11 years of sanctions, but Saddam is still very dangerous.

Regardless of one's opinion of United Nations inspections and sanctions, they did force a serious change in the ways Saddam deals with his war machine. He was made to spread his weapons of mass destruction into smaller units and hide them within the various government complexes. While this might shield them from potential air strikes, it also reduces their production capacity and creates a huge logistics problem in terms of servicing them.

After the Gulf War, Iraq moved quickly to reconstruct its chemical weapons complex in a way that would avoid discovery by inspectors. It mainly used military compounds to hide the units, and, according to some testimony, Russian experts were used at these sites. Because Iraq had extensive experience in the production and use of chemical weapons, it was relatively easy to get the program back in working order.

The biological weapons program proved more problematic. Restrictions on the use of imported growth media caused delays, as did the need for additional work on the design and manufacture of production units.

The biggest challenge, however, was the nuclear weapons program. It was possible to separate parts of that operation into smaller working units, including the groups responsible for designing parts and for manufacturing. The difficult part was designing and hiding the plants needed for uranium enrichment. These plants are easily detectable given the unavoidable release of uranium compounds. As well, splitting them into smaller units is detrimental to their efficiency and creates multiple sources of possible contamination.

Iraq possesses more than 10 tons of uranium and more than a ton of low enriched uranium. Small facilities are capable of handling these amounts, and, even taking into account process losses, there is still enough uranium to make three nu-

clear weapons. Iraq has already designated a site for nuclear weapon testing and if intelligence estimates are correct the first tests could happen by 2005. Without the inspectors or sanctions these processes would have been complete by now.

Iraq's conventional forces also suffered from sanctions. Though smuggling helped, Iraq is effectively without an air defense capability or air force. Conventional arms are in limited supply and their distribution is tightly controlled—especially heavy armament.

This has limited their use to the special Republican Guard divisions. Those pampered forces—which are estimated to be 20,000 to 30,000 strong—are drawn from the Sunni Muslim regions loyal to Saddam. He needs them to guard himself, members of his family, and the most sensitive parts of his war machine. The rest of the armed forces are relegated to a much lower status in terms of armament; they are therefore more likely to surrender in any serious combat.

Saddam remains his own worst enemy. For several years he refused the oil-for-food program, which meant prices of basic food and medicines skyrocketed. The Iraqi currency sank in value several thousand times. This dramatically reduced government wages, including those of the armed forces—which didn't help with loyalty. People gradually sold all of their possessions for sustenance. Saddam also cut off food rations in regions considered disloyal to him, including most of the southern provinces outside the major cities and the Kurdish enclave.

Army officers, meanwhile, were allowed incredible latitude. Most of them took to pilfering their conscripts' wages and food rations. Some took money from their soldiers in return for unlimited leaves of absence.

In fact, after the Gulf War there were so many deserters that they formed their own gangs at the outskirts of southern towns. These bands did hits for hire, committed highway robberies, and foraged for food in nearby villages. The security forces chasing deserters were even worse, wreaking wholesale destruction on any village considered to have provided sanctuary or help. British reporters working from the Iranian border document many of these instances.

Beating Saddam might not ultimately be that difficult. The Iraqi National Congress, an opposition group, estimates that a few thousand U.S.-trained Iraqi volunteers placed in the south, along with declared U.S. support, would help to draw disgruntled army units and deserters and turn them into a fighting force against Saddam. All that may be required of the U.S. is air support to help prevent Saddam's forces from leaving their barracks and to create a military no-drive zone. Limited numbers of U.S. Special Operations forces may also be required, as in Afghanistan.

But regardless of how the U.S. tackles Iraq, one thing is clear: There is no time to waste. Saddam's express goal is to continue building up his chemical and biological stockpiles, and to ultimately wield a nuclear weapon. Each day we wait, we allow him to go further toward that goal.